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# The Maritime Basis of American Security in East Asia

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# THE MARITIME BASIS OF AMERICAN SECURITY IN EAST ASIA

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*James E. Auer and Robyn Lim*

American policy toward East Asia must be based on an understanding of how the region's strategic geography bears on the interests of the United States as the dominant maritime power. The western Pacific has resumed its role as the focus of world economic growth, but it is not "all economics now." East Asia is the one part of the world where great-power war remains thinkable. That is because it is the only region where the Cold War left a residue of unresolved great-power strategic tensions.

Hanging off the eastern edge of Eurasia, the Korean Peninsula (half-island) continues in its historical role as the focus of great-power rivalry—albeit on the basis of new configurations of interest. Tension between the United States and China is growing in relation to the island of Taiwan, a flourishing democracy located in a key position on the "first island chain," running down the East Asian littoral. Farther offshore, China and other regional states contest the ownership of the scattered reefs and archipelagoes of the East and South China Seas.

These strategic tensions on the East Asian littoral must engage the interests of

the dominant maritime power and all those who rely on its protection. The United States has obligations to protect the maritime security of Japan, the world's second-largest economy. That is a matter of great convenience to both parties, as well as to the wider region, since the U.S.-Japan security treaty provides Japan with maritime protection in ways that do not disturb Japan's neighbors. Freedom of the seas is also an essential interest of the United States in its strategic capacity as the global offshore balancer.

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## THE UNITED STATES AS GLOBAL OFFSHORE BALANCER . . .

In May 1940, with most of Western Europe's coastline in Hitler's hands and Britain threatened with invasion, the United States inherited the British role as the global offshore balancer. No longer could America enjoy the "free security" provided for so long, *de facto*, by the Royal Navy. Since then strategic circumstances have changed, but strategic interests are remarkably enduring. The United States, having become the offshore balancer, must take a close interest in what is happening strategically on the opposite shores of its great ocean moat. Unless America can maintain a balance of power at both ends of Eurasia and ensure freedom of the seas, it cannot wage war much beyond its own southern and northern borders.<sup>1</sup>

Long before it became the global offshore balancer, America had a vital interest in the balance of power in the western Pacific. The United States became a Pacific power when it acquired Hawaii and the Philippines in 1898. Its need to see a balance of power struck across the Pacific Ocean was understood by President Theodore Roosevelt, who was much influenced by Alfred Thayer Mahan. Roosevelt knew that the Philippines was the nation's Achilles' heel: it was too close to Japan and too far from Hawaii. In 1905, he brokered the Treaty of Portsmouth, which concluded the Russo-Japanese War after the parties had fought to exhaustion. The equilibrium struck at Portsmouth did not last, because Japan had continental ambitions that clashed with America's interest in the "Open Door" to China. Soon, the U.S. Navy was gaming conflict with Japan. The Pacific War was not inevitable, but it had its roots in America's refusal to grant Japan a free hand in East Asia.

Ever since Portsmouth, the balance of power in East Asia has been up for grabs. Throughout last century's global strategic contests—the two world wars and the Cold War—the East Asian balance remained unsettled. The collapse of Soviet power brought equilibrium to Western Europe but not to the East Asian littoral. For reasons of history, culture, and domestic politics, the United States has been facing the wrong way strategically since it won the Cold War—toward Europe rather than the western Pacific. Still fighting the last war, America risks forgetting to deter the next.

The United States, because it is the offshore balancer, cannot tolerate a bid for hegemony over Eurasia or any of its critical parts. China, not Russia, is the current chief aspirant. To concede hegemony to China would mean that the United States would have little influence over what happens in East Asia and would be forced to operate there on terms set by Beijing. History's lesson is that a maritime power cannot concede dominance over vital seas to any rising power with a continent-sized base on the opposite shore. To do so invites strangulation and ultimately invasion. In its long history as the offshore balancer, the United

Kingdom stood at greatest risk of invasion—in 1588 and 1940—when a state dominant on the continent developed sufficient maritime power to threaten the British in their island redoubt.

### ... AN OCEAN AWAY FROM THE EAST ASIAN LITTORAL

The Pacific is the widest of the world's oceans, larger than the Indian and Atlantic Oceans combined. Located as it is in the Western Hemisphere, the United States cannot hope to maintain a balance of power across the vast reaches of the Pacific unless it has access to bases on or just off the East Asian littoral. That is why America's alliance with Japan rests on a congruence of strategic interests: in return for providing the United States with bases—which also provide access for a range of regional contingencies—Japan is afforded maritime and nuclear protection. Japan is an industrialized but resource-poor archipelago barely off the littoral, dependent on long sea routes for vital energy imports from the Persian Gulf. The uncontested exercise of hostile maritime power by any littoral state would rapidly bring Japan to heel, without need for invasion.

The United States, in the interests of its own security and that of Japan, cannot grant China a free hand in East Asia. It simply cannot afford to accept that in East Asia its "ability to ensure regional stability through forward presence and the deployment of naval power may be nearing an end."<sup>2</sup>

### WHY TAIWAN MATTERS

Taiwan is the current locus of great-power strategic tension, as Berlin was during the Cold War. The preservation of Berlin's independence was a strategic interest of the United States, one that justified the risk of war with Moscow. Force-balances matter. By providing military capacity adequate to protect the Western Europeans from Soviet attack, and demonstrating the will to fight if necessary, the United States ensured that it did not have to go to war with the Soviet Union. America's possession of nuclear weapons played a critical role in deterring Soviet assertions (based on proximity) of hegemony over Eurasia—the 1948 Berlin airlift providing an early test.

For similar reasons, preservation of Taiwan's *de facto* independence is an American interest that justifies risking war with China. China sees Taiwan as a renegade province that it has the right to bring to heel, by force if necessary. No one in the current leadership in Beijing wants to go down in history as having lost Taiwan, which all see slipping away. But if China were to succeed in taking Taiwan by force or threat, it would be well on the way to hegemony over East Asia. Japan would lose confidence in U.S. protection and might opt to go it alone, developing long-range maritime power and a nuclear capability. That would be likely to destabilize the region, as others became afraid of Japan and

started to arm against it. Only by maintaining adequate force levels in the western Pacific, and demonstrating the will to use them if necessary, can the United States deter Chinese assertions of regional hegemony made on the basis of proximity. No doubt, this would have been readily comprehended by the geostrategist Nicholas Spykman, that great Yale Dutchman, who died in 1942.

### MUDDLED THINKING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Strategic geography is enjoying an overdue revival in the United States, but the United States has not produced another Spykman. Recent analysts of East Asia's strategic geography are muddled in their approaches. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for example, is mistaken when he says that America should focus on moving the pieces around the Eurasian chessboard.<sup>3</sup> To the contrary, as the offshore balancer the United States must concentrate on controlling the waves on either side of the board.

Brzezinski's flawed logic helped underpin the misguided eastward expansion of Nato. It gave reassurance where none was needed, and on a basis unnecessarily antagonistic to Russia. It also played into the hands of Beijing, by distracting America's attention from the more pressing strategic problems of East Asia. Brzezinski's mistaken assumption that America must seek geostrategic consensus with China in order to gain a political foothold on the Asian mainland also helped generate President William Clinton's bizarre notion of "strategic partnership" with China.

That notion received support from the dominant school in American political science, which has fostered concepts of "bipolarity" between the United States and China, leading to supposedly shared interests.<sup>4</sup> Because they thought that bipolarity was inherently stable, the "structuralists" thought the Cold War would go on for ever. They did not see that in the late 1970s the Soviets were out to win. Unlike, however, the political scientists and his own predecessors, President Ronald Reagan did correctly perceive Soviet intentions. Reagan also understood the importance of forthrightly confronting the enemy. That goal informed his strategic programs, including the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Current imaginings of U.S.-China bipolarity are as misguided as the bipolarity concept was during the Cold War. Their anti-Soviet alliance of convenience having dissolved, the United States and China now represent opposed poles of strategic interest in the western Pacific. True, they have some common interests on the Korean Peninsula—for example, that there should be no war and that neither Korea should acquire nuclear weapons. However, after the Koreas are reunited, China and the United States will have even fewer shared interests in the western Pacific. China already advocates the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula, as a first step to seeing them removed from the entire western Pacific.

Nor do East Asia's strategic tensions arise from so-called "security dilemmas"—those analytical *dei ex machina*—as the arms control fraternity believes.<sup>5</sup> The advocates of arms control treat China and Japan as equally likely to cause problems. What they fail to see is that China has strategic ambitions, while Japan has strategic anxieties.<sup>6</sup> Japan is already starting to feel Chinese strategic pressure on its energy lifeline from the Gulf. Strategic tensions arise from collisions of interest, not from simple misunderstanding, accident, and so on; they are not amenable to resolution by confidence-building measures, preventative diplomacy, or other arms control panaceas. *Deterrence* prevents war. Why must these essential lessons of strategic history be constantly relearned?

### MARITIME POWER AND GEOSTRATEGIC ASYMMETRIES

Today's Sino-U.S. tensions represent the latest round of the historic competition between maritime and continental powers. Currently, China has little ability to project power beyond its frontiers. Still, its strategic geography means that China does not have to become a "peer competitor" of the United States in order to collide with its vital interests.

The United States can remain an Asian Pacific power only as long as it can project maritime force across the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean. It no longer has bases in the Philippines. Because China, in contrast, enjoys the advantages of proximity, it does not need to develop maritime power commensurate with that of the United States in order to make the South China Sea a Chinese lake. Uncontested exercise of maritime power in the South China Sea would allow Beijing to plant its foot on Japan's resource jugular; then, calculating that Japan could feel compelled to comply, China might insist that Japan evict the United States from its bases there.

It is also important to read history with an eye to geostrategic asymmetries. Throughout the last century's great strategic contests, the dominant land powers did not seek hegemony at sea, because it was not a prerequisite for hegemony on land. What they sought was sufficient maritime power to deter the offshore balancer from playing its traditional role—which was to prevent a continental power from achieving hegemony over Europe/Eurasia.

Drawing analogies between Germany in the years leading up to the First World War and China now, Robert Ross notes that Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz's "risk fleet" was bound to fail, because Germany could never have developed sufficient naval capabilities to threaten British maritime supremacy.<sup>7</sup> But that misses the point. The "risk fleet's" purpose was not to challenge the Royal Navy all around the globe; rather, Germany sought to challenge the British navy specifically in the North Sea, in order to prevent Britain from being able to play its traditional role of offshore balancer in Europe. That was all Germany needed

to do to win. Commanding the central geographical position in Europe, Germany had advanced military and technological capabilities. Had the “risk

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fleet” been able to preoccupy the Royal Navy in the North Sea, Germany would have succeeded in gaining hegemony over Europe. With the resources of Europe at its command, Germany would have eventu-

ally developed sufficient maritime power to invade the British Isles. Britain’s accelerated dreadnought-construction program registered that it perceived the threat.

For similar reasons, after the fall of France in 1940 the United States had no choice but to inherit the British role as offshore balancer. Although isolationism remained powerful in the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt understood the threat posed by Hitler’s overthrow of the balance of power in Europe. So he pushed through an accelerated program to build a two-ocean navy.

In the Cold War, geostrategic asymmetries meant that the USSR did not need to match the American navy in order to win. The Soviet Union already commanded the dominant position in Eurasia. That was a consequence of the way the Second World War had ended;<sup>8</sup> when the fighting stopped, the Red Army had been dangerously close to hegemony over Europe.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s, Moscow was so encouraged by its achievement of strategic nuclear parity and by the U.S. post-Vietnam strategic paralysis that it thought it could win the Cold War. Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, Russia’s answer to Mahan, began to develop a Soviet blue-water capability—the Soviet version of the kaiser’s “risk fleet.”

The Soviet Union, given its commanding position in Eurasia, did not need to develop maritime power equal to America’s in order to challenge the United States for first place in the world hierarchy. Rather, it sought sufficient power at sea to deter the United States from playing the role of offshore balancer; that was all that Moscow needed in order to win. Like Admiral Tirpitz before him, Admiral Gorshkov did not set out to challenge the dominant global maritime power all over the world; had the Soviet Union developed sufficient maritime power to make the United States unable to keep the sea lanes open to Western Europe, Moscow would have won the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> That was why Admiral Gorshkov’s push for a blue-water navy represented a threat the United States could not afford to ignore. President Reagan’s maritime strategy registered Washington’s understanding of the point—just as the British had met the German challenge before the First World War with the dreadnought program, and President Franklin Roosevelt had responded to the fall of France with the two-ocean navy.

We have probably seen the end of the grand strategic competitions for superiority over Eurasia that propelled the United States into the box seat.

America, called upon in two world wars and the Cold War to redress the balance of power in Europe, achieved definitive success in the Cold War. In the latter it defeated the Soviet Union, while Britain, France, Germany, and Japan all depended on the United States for their ultimate security.

But strategic history has not ended. Like the ambitions of Admirals von Tirpitz and Gorshkov, China's ambition to develop a blue-water navy does not signal an intention to develop maritime power in order to challenge the dominant maritime power all over the globe. Rather, China—which occupies the central geographic position on the mainland—seeks to develop sufficient maritime power to deter the United States from playing the role of offshore balancer in East Asia. Through purchases of sophisticated Russian equipment, China is seeking to develop “asymmetrical capabilities” intended to deter U.S. aircraft carriers from intervening in a Taiwan crisis.

History may not repeat itself, but some patterns are too obvious to ignore. If China thinks it can enact another Pearl Harbor by attacking or even sinking a U.S. carrier, Beijing ought to reflect on the consequences for Japan of the events of 7 December 1941.

#### **CHINA: A RISING CONTINENTAL POWER WITH BLUE-WATER AMBITION**

China does not represent a threat anything like that once posed by the Soviet Union, when the USSR possessed huge military power and stretched across Eurasia, threatening U.S. allies at both ends of that landmass. Nor has China suddenly become powerful. Still, it is enjoying a strategic latitude unprecedented in modern times, because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the withdrawal of Soviet forward-deployed forces from Mongolia, and the ending of the Soviet alliance with Vietnam. Pointing strategically eastward and southward, China is pressing on its maritime frontiers in the East and South China Seas. China is unwilling to consider the rights and interests of others; it is focused on its own sense of entitlement and historical grievance. The parallels with Japan in the 1930s are striking.

China wants and needs no allies, because its strategic needs are regional and concentrated. It requires only a regional military capability, supported by a credible minimum nuclear deterrent as a shield against nuclear blackmail. In contrast, because the United States is the offshore balancer, it needs large resources of maritime power, nuclear weapons, bases, and allies. These requirements arise from strategic necessity, not hubris, although China does not see it that way.

China's vast territorial claims, turned on and off at will, in the South China Sea are fueled by a drive for power and resources. China is pressing on the vital



Malacca Straits, which link the Indian and Pacific Oceans, from both directions. At the western entrance to the Strait, China has a strategic foothold in the Coco Islands, owned by friendless Burma. At the eastern entrance to the Strait, China's claims extend as far south as the Natuna Islands, which guard the approaches to Java, heartland of the Indonesian Archipelago.<sup>11</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia's other great archipelago, the Philippines, has been a weak link in the offshore island chain. By requiring in 1991 that the United States leave its naval base at Subic Bay, the Philippines stretched U.S. strategic mobility; it also did much to embolden China. A year later, the Chinese rubber-stamp parliament reasserted China's extensive claims in the East and South China Seas—including, by implication, the right to use force against U.S. allies. Central to China's new assertiveness were the ideas of the then-commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy, Admiral Liu Huaqing, China's answer to Mahan.<sup>12</sup> In 1995, China's grab of Mischief Reef in the Spratly archipelago came to light. China has since proceeded to fortify the reef, claiming that it is merely building fishermen's shacks. Mischief Reef, which is also claimed by the Philippines, is well within the Philippines' two-hundred-mile exclusive economic zone. It is unlikely that China would have seized the reef had the U.S. Navy still been in Subic.

The Philippines, which has virtually no navy of its own, has long sought to entangle America in its claims in the South China Sea.<sup>13</sup> However, the United States has no obligation to support Philippine claims in the Spratlys; it has no interest in the ownership of these scattered reefs and archipelagoes. But it does have a vital interest in maritime passage through the South China Sea—both on its own account as the offshore balancer, and because of its commitments to Japan's resource security. The United States also has an essential interest in deterring China from making threats against its allies. America's mutual security treaties with Japan and the Philippines tie it to issues of strategic contention in both the East and South China Seas.

In 1995–96, a tepid American response to China's reassertions of its territorial claims in the South China Sea encouraged China to go farther: it probed toward the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Japan has long claimed these islands, whereas China became interested in them only in the 1970s, when there seemed a prospect of oil deposits nearby. After the Second World War, the United States administered the Senkakus as part of Okinawa and developed a bombing range there. It handed over their administration to Japan when Okinawa was returned in 1972, thus continuing to include the Senkakus, *de jure*, within the scope of the U.S.-Japan security treaty. Nonetheless, the Clinton administration, for fear of offending China, refused to acknowledge publicly that the Senkakus come within the treaty's ambit. That further

emboldened China; it is not surprising that China's probes around the Senkakus and Okinawa increased. China has even become bold enough to send surveillance vessels through the Tsugaru Strait, in the heart of the Japanese archipelago.<sup>14</sup>

In 1996, China "ratified" the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as if it were an archipelagic state, which it was not entitled to do. Further, it drew archipelagic baselines around the Paracel Islands, which it took from Vietnam by force in 1974, to prevent their falling into the hands of North Vietnam, China's supposed ally at the time—a nice example of realpolitik. In 1988, Chinese and Vietnamese forces clashed in the Spratlys.

For China, taking the Paracels was a pushover; the more distant Spratlys are not. China, having learned lessons from the demise of the Soviet Union, is developing its military capabilities at a modest pace that does not outrun economic growth. But China no doubt intends, once it has developed longer-range maritime capabilities (including sophisticated Russian military technology), to pick off the other claimants one by one.

The Clinton administration persisted in seeing these sources of strategic contention in the East and South China Seas as legal issues, whereas in fact they are strategic issues with legal faces. If the United States continues to ignore its equity in these islands, it is only a matter of time before China makes an archipelagic claim to the whole of the Spratlys.

## WOBBLES TO THE SOUTH

China sees time as a strategic asset, in the way that the Soviet Union saw space (distance, that is, not *kosmos*) as a strategic asset. Beijing seeks to convince the Southeast Asians that time is on its side. "Remember Saigon," the Chinese say; "the Americans are unreliable and may leave, but China will be here for ever." Thus the Southeast Asians are urged to accommodate Beijing now, lest the price of future accommodation be made higher.

The Southeast Asians have not been completely supine, and some seek to keep America actively engaged in their region. Thailand conducts annual military exercises (COBRA GOLD) with the United States, and Singapore joined in recently. Singapore, the region's geostrategic pivot because of its vital position in the Malacca Straits, is building a berth at Changi Naval Base to accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers. It also bases much of its air force in Australia, a U.S. ally. Both Malaysia and Singapore participate in the Five Power Defence Arrangements, which provide an umbrella under which they can cooperate with each other and with Western powers.<sup>15</sup> Under the auspices of the FPDA, Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18 aircraft regularly deploy to Butterworth in northern Malaysia; also, Australian maritime surveillance aircraft operating from Butterworth conduct missions over the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Even the Philippine senate, which voted in 1991 to evict the U.S. Navy from Subic Bay, caught a whiff of realpolitik when China started to build its base on Mischief Reef; in 1999, the senate approved a new Visiting Forces Agreement that will allow U.S. ship visits.

In general, however, confronted with a rising China, the Southeast Asians are wobbly. The U.S. Navy, for instance, will not be returning to Subic Bay as a base; Philippine miscalculation has done much to let China into the South China Sea. China enjoys the advantages of centrality, as its history as the Middle Kingdom shows. It also has size, demographic weight, and nuclear weapons. Unlike Japan and Australia, the Southeast Asians do not enjoy the benefits of extended nuclear deterrence. They know that China, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, could veto any reaction under the Charter to an aggression by China itself.

Rising tension between China and America worries the Southeast Asians, and they dread being forced to choose sides. They are unsure of how much they could depend on external support, were they to stand up to China, or what might result, such as a militarily stronger Japan. Except for Singapore, they have been forced by the recession to reduce their military spending, while China's has gone on unabated. Most states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are fragmented societies, and the economic downturn has exposed many fissures within them. The economic power of China's diaspora worries them, and many fear its fifth-column potential.

Even the five founding members of ASEAN have been squabbling, undermining any notion that the association could act as a bulwark of regional stability.<sup>16</sup> Indonesia, the *primus inter pares* in Southeast Asia, remains in post-Suharto turmoil and could break up; growing secessionist pressures in its outer islands reflect weakness at the center. For all these reasons, the Southeast Asians have been unable to combine in defense of their interests in the South China Sea. They continue to pursue conflicting territorial claims there. That has allowed China to divide and rule, even in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). China also uses the ARF as a forum for alliance busting: it argues that because the Cold War is over, the region no longer needs America's alliance system or its forward-based forces.<sup>17</sup>

#### ASEAN AND TAIWAN: SEE NO EVIL

The Southeast Asians know that China is steadily building up its missiles opposite Taiwan and that China has implicitly threatened Taiwan with nuclear weapons. Yet they profess to see no connection between their own security and the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait. During the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996, China sought to intimidate Taiwan as it held its first direct presidential elections. It lobbed nuclear-capable missiles within a few miles of Taiwan's ports, some of

them landing close to Japan's outer islands.<sup>18</sup> The United States responded by dispatching two aircraft carrier battle groups, led respectively by the USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) and *Independence* (CV 62), to the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait. However, ASEAN was mute, except for mild complaint from Singapore.

In the wake of Taiwan's presidential elections in March 2000, which saw the ruling Kuomintang replaced by the Democratic Progressive Party, led by Chen Shui-bian, the reaction of ASEAN has, again, been silence. Ignoring China's bluster and threats against Taiwan before the elections—which proved counter-productive in any case—Singapore's senior minister, Lee Kuan Yew, even implied that Taiwan was at fault for “provoking” China and declared that reunification is inevitable.<sup>19</sup>

Lee should look over his shoulder. If China has the right to reintegrate Taiwan by force, does not Malaysia have the right to reintegrate Singapore by the same means? Lee seems unable to comprehend that the United States, in the interests of its own security and that of Japan, cannot afford to let China take Taiwan by force. If that happened, who in East Asia would feel safe? The fates of Taiwan and Singapore, those wealthy ethnically Chinese islands off East Asia's edge, are inextricably linked, but Lee cannot seem to see it. Thus Southeast Asia's senior statesman plays into the hands of Beijing, which flatters Singapore as a model of a market economy with party control. Also, of course, the democratic transition in Taiwan, the first in the long history of the Chinese people, is an affront to authoritarian Singapore.

No one expects ASEAN to stand up and shout at Beijing, but by professing to see no stake in Taiwan's continued de facto independence, it emboldens China. Still, its timidity is no reason for the United States to give up on it. Indeed, the United States cannot afford to do so, in the interests either of its own maritime security or of Japan's need for maritime protection.

## JAPAN'S NEED FOR MARITIME PROTECTION

Commodore Matthew C. Perry, U.S. Navy, demonstrated in 1853 the vulnerabilities of an archipelagic state when he trained the guns of his “black ships” on the decayed Tokyo forts—even though trade, not conquest, was his purpose. Archipelagic states are especially susceptible to the exercise of hostile maritime power because of the ease with which such power can be brought to bear against their capitals. Japan took the point. If it wished to avoid the fate of China, which the European powers were carving up into zones of influence, Japan could no longer seek security in self-imposed isolation. After 1868, the Meiji Restoration rapidly brought Japan into the global system, as a third center of economic and military power, after Europe and the United States.

Because Japan is an island nation, its ambitions on the continent after 1905 were discretionary; they did not arise from strategic necessity. After the Russo-Japanese War, which ended in that year, Japan had all it needed—it had blocked the Russian threat via Korea and Manchuria; it enjoyed access to the resources of Manchuria; and it had an alliance with Great Britain, the dominant maritime power. By pursuing nonetheless its ambitions in China, Japan succeeded only in undermining its security. As it advanced down the China coast, Japan increasingly came into collision with the two key East Asian interests of a great industrial and maritime power having a continent-sized base in the Western Hemisphere: America's stake in the Open Door to China and in the security of the Philippines led it to refuse to concede hegemony over East Asia to Japan.

The 1941–45 Pacific War demonstrated in spades Japan's vulnerability to hostile maritime power, a fact that the atomic bombings have tended to obscure. Japan was strangled by a combination of the U.S. Navy's fast carriers, fleet train, amphibious assault forces, and submarines, and Army Air Force long-range bombers flying from island bases seized by assault from the sea.<sup>20</sup> While much of the Japanese army was still thrashing about in China, to no strategic purpose, American maritime power took Japan by the front door.

Prostrate, postwar Japan was vulnerable to the combined forces of the great land powers of East Asia, the Soviet Union and China, who became allies in 1950. Indeed, their alliance was specifically pointed at Japan. As early as 1942, Spykman had foreseen the need for the United States to protect postwar Japan against the Soviet Union, whose Pacific face had long given it opportunities and ambition. The need to defend Japan was one of America's main reasons for entering the Korean War; the United States could not afford to let the only industrialized country in Asia fall to the Sino-Soviet bloc. Japan, assured of American maritime protection as long as it agreed to provide bases for the United States, was freed to concentrate on economic recovery. In turn, that helped the rest of noncommunist East Asia to recover.

### JAPAN'S ROLE IN WINNING THE COLD WAR

During the Cold War, Japan was neither an economic threat to the United States nor a free rider, as so many now seem to think. To the contrary, Japan played an important role in bringing down the overextended Soviet empire.

Japan's geostrategic location made it a vital link in a global chain of maritime power that depended critically on nuclear weapons to counter overwhelming Soviet proximate power in Europe. In order to bring countervailing pressure to bear on the vulnerable eastern flank of the Soviet Union, the United States needed a combination of East Asian allies, maritime power, and nuclear weapons. Although

the Cold War had its roots in Europe, over time the East Asian dimension of this global strategic contest progressively grew in importance.

In the 1980s, Japan's navy developed significant maritime capability, in conjunction with President Reagan's maritime strategy, and the Soviets perceived that Japan was willing to fight if necessary. The U.S. maritime strategy published in 1986 was a logical response to the global strategic challenge laid down by the

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Soviet Union in the late 1970s.<sup>21</sup> In 1979, the fall of the shah of Iran created an "arc of crisis" in the Persian Gulf. British withdrawal from "East of Suez" brought the Soviet navy hot-foot into the Indian Ocean, not least

from Vladivostok. Moscow also concocted arms control schemes in the Indian Ocean. Deeply attractive to India, Moscow's ally, these regimes aimed at hobbling U.S. access to the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, which was critical to U.S. ability to reinforce the Gulf.<sup>22</sup>

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Moscow's support for Cuban surrogates in Africa reflected the Kremlin's belief that the "correlation of forces" was moving decisively in its favor. The Soviet Union also tried to intimidate Japan by stationing a division of troops in the illegally occupied Japanese "Northern Territories" south of the Kurile Islands, visibly threatening Hokkaido. In addition, two Soviet aircraft carriers were based at Vladivostok, just across the Sea of Japan.

The maritime strategy envisaged Western navies taking the war to the enemy in both the North Atlantic and the North Pacific. Comparative advantage at sea enabled the United States to exploit the key geostrategic problem of its continental adversary—Soviet vulnerability to war at both ends of its eight-thousand-mile east-west axis. Combined with China's enmity to the Soviet Union (their alliance, though never formally abrogated, was far from close), the maritime strategy posed an immense strategic complication for Moscow. It dispersed Soviet forces and made credible the threat that war in the West would also mean war in the East.

To the east, an integral part of the maritime strategy was the development of an effective, high-technology air defense and antisubmarine network around the Japanese archipelago. Fully armed Japanese naval aircraft, alternating on a daily basis with U.S. Navy antisubmarine aircraft, patrolled throughout the Sea of Japan, upon which lie Vladivostok and other Soviet Pacific Fleet bases. That convinced Soviet naval commanders that Japan was prepared to fight alongside the United States if necessary. Officially, the Japanese government's position was

that it could not participate in collective self-defense; Japan's actions sent a different message.

The strategic geography of the Japanese archipelago greatly facilitated the maritime strategy, because Japan could control all the Soviet navy's exits from its Sea of Japan bases. By controlling the sea lanes through that sea, the United States and Japan made it impossible for the Soviets to feel confident that they could, in wartime, support their bases at Petropavlovsk and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam;<sup>23</sup> all the critical supplies had to come out of Vladivostok. The two Soviet aircraft carriers stationed there were also much less capable than the USS *Midway* (CV 41), based at Yokosuka. In addition, Japan played its part in ensuring that the global nuclear balance did not tilt in Moscow's favor. The U.S. and Japanese navies exploited Soviet geostrategic problems by threatening the Soviet strategic ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) fleet in its "bastion" in the Sea of Okhotsk.<sup>24</sup> (At the other end of Eurasia, its equivalent was the Barents Sea.)

Japan's strategic geography also facilitated political management of Japan's contribution to the maritime strategy. Japan's defense of the sea lanes out to a thousand nautical miles sounded modest and did not arouse undue opposition at home. The Soviet Union undermined its own objectives by minatory behavior that produced a palpable sense of threat in the Japanese public. America's de facto alliance with China also helped, because Beijing did not oppose the extension of Japan's maritime capabilities. That helped mute opposition in Japan, where the socialists had long sung Beijing's tune. But the critics were not so easily silenced in relation to nuclear weapons, a vital adjunct to American maritime power.

## NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND MARITIME POWER: THE COLD WAR

Nuclear weapons are not popular anywhere, least of all in Japan, as a consequence of the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Notwithstanding, nuclear weapons were vital during the Cold War for the United States, because it was a distant power that needed to counter Soviet assertions of hegemony, made on the basis of proximity, over Eurasia. In 1952, the original U.S.-Japan security treaty gave the United States carte blanche, including the rights to store nuclear weapons in Japan and to launch them without consultation. A revision of the treaty in 1960, at Japan's behest, obliged the United States to consult Japan about any changes to be made in the equipment of U.S. forces in Japan.

Nuclear weapons were removed from Okinawa when it reverted to Japanese control in 1972. In 1969, Japan announced its three nonnuclear principles—not to possess or manufacture nuclear weapons or to allow them in Japanese territory—its prime minister Eisaku Sato (1966–72) even winning a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in establishing those principles. Japan's nonnuclear status preserved



domestic harmony and also furthered its aspirations to be recognized as a great power. Japan's diplomats pursued the objective of nuclear disarmament, seeing it as Japan's main claim to permanent membership in the UN Security Council.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, and *sotto voce*, Japan continued to rely on extended deterrence. That seemed even more necessary when China exploded its first nuclear weapon in 1964. So when nuclear-capable American ships entered Japanese ports, Japan did not ask, and the United States did not declare, whether such weapons actually were aboard the warships. How could it have been otherwise in an alliance critically dependent on nuclear weapons and maritime power?

If Japan had really believed that nuclear weapons were irrelevant to its security or represented unacceptable dangers, it could have opted out of the U.S. alliance at any time after 1971.<sup>26</sup> It did not do so because the last thing the Japanese really wanted was to be left alone to cope with China, Russia, and North Korea as best they could.

Japan's strategic geography also facilitated political management of nuclear issues. As long as the United States had submarines capable of targeting the Soviet maritime provinces, Japan felt no need to have nuclear weapons stationed on its territory. Thus Japan avoided the political problems associated with intermediate-range nuclear force deployments in Western Europe. There Moscow's exploitation of antinuclear sentiment, especially in Germany, came close to splitting Nato. In 1992, President George Bush's removal of tactical nuclear weapons further eased the political management of nuclear issues in Japan. Still, with the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons lost none of their salience for Japan's security.

## THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS TO EAST ASIAN SECURITY

Even in changed strategic circumstances, some fundamentals of Asia-Pacific security have not altered. Because it is the offshore balancer, the United States still needs large resources of maritime power and nuclear weapons in order to maintain a balance of power in the western Pacific. American nuclear weapons and maritime power were critical in preventing the Soviet Union from winning the Cold War on the basis of its assertions of domination over Eurasia. America's nuclear and maritime capabilities remain no less important in deterring China's designs for hegemony over East Asia. The United States must retain adequate reserves of nuclear weapons, resisting the clamor of those who say that nuclear weapons have no utility now that the Cold War is over. Nuclear weapons, like the old concept of the "fleet in being," work all the time as deterrents, simply because they exist.



Because Japan cannot rely on its three nonnuclear principles for its strategic security, the United States must also continue to supply a credible nuclear umbrella over Japan. India having tested nuclear weapons in 1998, Japan is now the only Asian great power without them. East Asia's strategic future will turn on whether the United States, Japan, and China all continue to believe that the United States will underwrite Japan's nuclear and maritime security.

Japan cannot remain unconcerned when China rattles its nuclear-capable missile arsenal in efforts to intimidate the Taiwanese into submission. Farther north, North Korea's nuclear weapons program no doubt continues, as does its missile program. As the arms controllers tend to forget, the strategic value of any weapon depends on who owns it. Although North Korea appears somewhat less odious after the 15 June 2000 Korean summit, its enigmatic (if not irrational) behavior, which includes the willingness to see millions of its own subjects starve in order to preserve itself in power, remains largely unchanged.

North Korea's missiles and nuclear ambiguity have been very useful in black-mailing the United States and others into large-scale aid to North Korea, in order to prop up that failed state, an orphan of the Cold War.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the North Koreans seemed to have drawn appropriate conclusions from the Gulf War—that those who wish to defy the United States should first seek nuclear weapons and the means of delivery. If the process of Korean reunification is indeed in train, as now seems possible, Japan will worry that a reunited state might inherit the North Korean nuclear weapons program. Given the history and geography of the peninsula, it would not be surprising if a reunified Korea responded to the nuclear attraction. Would Japan then be content to continue to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella?

The United States must be more attentive to Japan's legitimate security needs.<sup>28</sup> Pursuing arms control and nonproliferation as objectives in themselves, as the Clinton administration did, obscures the equations of power in East Asia. In a region where the balance of power remains unsettled, states seek security because they must. Japan is no exception, whatever the continuing strength of its domestic pacifism.<sup>29</sup>

#### TOWARD AN ALLIANCE THAT IS READY TO FIGHT AT SEA

Many of the strategic lessons of the Cold War either were not understood in both Japan and the United States or were rapidly forgotten. Since then, the U.S.-Japan alliance has been allowed to drift because of lack of consistent attention at the top in both countries. It now urgently needs an overhaul.

The Japanese government ducked its responsibilities to explain to its public the role that Japan played in maritime strategy. As a result, Japan was unprepared to respond adequately to the 1990–91 Gulf War. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait

and the threat posed to Saudi Arabia represented palpable menaces to Japan, given its need for resource security. But because the threat was distant, few in Japan seemed to perceive it. Japan dithered, threw money at the problem, and eventually sent four minesweepers to the Strait of Hormuz—after the war was over.<sup>30</sup> It got little thanks, even from Kuwait. Had the war gone on longer or American casualties been higher, the U.S.-Japan alliance could have ruptured.<sup>31</sup>

Reading the lessons of the Gulf War, the United States moved to shore up its alliance with Japan. It also recognized the economic importance of East Asia and the critical fact that the power balance there remained unsettled. For those reasons, it kept force reductions in the region to a minimum. At the other end of Eurasia, the restoration of equilibrium as a consequence of the collapse of Soviet power made it possible for Western Europe to absorb dramatic U.S. force reductions without compromising security. That was not the case in East Asia; accordingly, the United States reaffirmed its intention to maintain a hundred thousand forward-deployed troops in East Asia, the same number as in Europe.

Thus it was that the United States encouraged Japan to pursue a more outward-looking security policy and to develop the resources needed to sustain it. New U.S.-Japan defense guidelines now allow a modest amount of Japanese rear-echelon support in emergencies in “areas surrounding Japan”—which means Korea and Taiwan. Japan has also agreed to cooperate with the United States in the development of theater missile defenses, including the Aegis ship-based system, though China rails against it.

But these changes represent only modest improvements. The Gulf War showed the need to readjust the offensive and defensive roles that the United States and Japan, respectively, would need to play in any regional contingency. The alliance remains exposed to a contingency in Korea or the Taiwan Strait. If Americans start taking casualties and Japan does not do enough to help, political support in the United States for the alliance could rapidly evaporate.

The critical thing Japan needs to do is to move away from the illogical notion that while it has the right to collective self-defense, its (American-written) constitution does not permit the exercise of that right.<sup>32</sup> That notion means, at least in theory, that if Japanese ships were patrolling with the U.S. Navy and only the American ships were attacked, Japanese ships could not fight in their defense. That absurd interpretation cannot be allowed to persist. It flies in the face of everything we have learned about deterrence—that status-quo powers who look as if they are willing to fight rarely need to do so.

The current situation is even more absurd in that Japan has a navy second only to that of the United States itself, albeit one without power-projection capabilities. Japan has not only a real navy but a unique maritime potential in East Asia. Oddly, this has escaped attention. A recent analysis of East Asia’s strategic

geography quoted Mahan: "History has conclusively demonstrated the inability of a state with even a single continental frontier to compete in naval development with one that is insular, although of smaller population and resources."<sup>33</sup> But the quotation was made in relation to China, not Japan.

Japan, unlike Asia's other great powers, does not suffer from the immense strategic distraction of potential enemies on land frontiers. It is allied with the dominant maritime power, as it was in the years from 1902 to 1922. The difference is that this time Japan is not using its alliance as a shield while it pursues ambition on the continent. Also, this time Japan is working in concert with the great maritime and industrial power based in the Western Hemisphere, not against it.

Together, the United States and Japan are providing security for almost the entire western Pacific while spending, respectively, only 3 and 1 percent of gross national product on defense. They must think, however, and act more strategically, which is always hard for democracies when they do not face palpable threats. For reasons that have been laid out in this article, both the United States and Japan have vital national interests at stake in the preservation of Taiwan's de facto independence. In a future Taiwan crisis, it should be possible for an American president to ask that Japanese warships accompany an American task force sailing from Yokosuka, and for a Japanese prime minister to assent. If such complementarity were to become operationally credible, it would not launch Japan on the road to revived militarism. To the contrary, it would credibly strengthen deterrence under a U.S.-Japan umbrella, to the benefit of the entire Asia-Pacific community.

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#### NOTES

1. Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 276.
2. Douglas Porch, "The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996: Strategic Implications for the United States Navy," *Naval War College Review*, Summer 1999, p. 16.
3. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
4. Despite global unipolarity, East Asia is held to be bipolar, divided into continental and maritime regions. Bipolarity is held to be stable. Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security*, Spring 1999, p. 82.
5. Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security*, Spring 1999, pp. 49–80.
6. The same arguments are currently being recycled in relation to ballistic missile defenses. BMD opponents represent the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty as a cornerstone of strategic stability. Its abrogation, they say, would cause security dilemmas and an "arms race." Only if one accepts the mad logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD)—the virtue of self-imposed vulnerability—can one believe that the ABM treaty is a cornerstone of

stability. The Soviets never accepted the logic of MAD, as shown, for example, by the aggressive way in which they pursued their antisatellite programs, even during the period of high détente. But they did seize the opportunity to hobble Western technology. Currently, in opposing national and theater missile defense, Russia and China seek to keep Western technology hobbled, because they know they cannot compete with it. To China, the prospect of American and Japanese technological cooperation is especially unwelcome. But if nuclear competition is to be the name of the game in East Asia, as seems likely, the United States should set the terms, not allow China to do so.

7. Ross, p. 107.
8. In 1942, Spykman foresaw that “a Russian state from the Urals to the North Sea can be no great improvement over a German state from the North Sea to the Urals.” Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), p. 460.
9. That is why the governments of Western Europe, many of them quite left-wing at the time, clamored for American protection. Ironically, the time that the Europeans were most afraid was the period of the U.S. nuclear monopoly (1945–49). But that does not mean, as many now claim, that nuclear weapons were irrelevant to the correlation of forces at the beginning of the Cold War. On the contrary, U.S. possession of nuclear weapons, and its demonstrated will to use them if necessary, gave its allies the confidence to stand up to Moscow.
10. The strategic geography of the Cold War largely replicated that of World War II—that is, conflict in Europe was largely continental, though dependent on maritime reinforcements. In the Pacific, in both cases the conflict was largely maritime.
11. In December 1995, it was the realization that China's territorial claims might include the Natuna Islands, which guard the eastern approaches to Java, that drove Indonesia into unprecedented strategic alignment with Australia. That alignment did not survive the 1999 East Timor crisis, which saw a sharp deterioration in the Indonesia-Australia relationship as a consequence of Australia's UN-authorized military intervention in East Timor.
12. That decision was made over the objections of the Chinese foreign ministry. Michael Studeman [Lt., USN], “Calculating China's Advances in the South China Sea: Identifying the Triggers of ‘Expansionism,’ ” *Naval War College Review*, Spring 1998, pp. 79–80.
13. The purpose, no doubt, of the Philippine practice of tearing up Chinese reef markers.
14. *Japan Times*, 19 May 2000. The strait is an international waterway, but the point is China's astonishing display of maritime hubris, given that Japan has a real navy and China does not.
15. Members are Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore. The FPDA was set up after the British withdrawal from East of Suez, in order to ameliorate tensions between Malaysia and Singapore after the latter was expelled from Malaysia in 1965. It seeks to create a framework in which the Southeast Asian parties can cooperate in their external defense. Its most important element is the Integrated Air Defence System, which has always been commanded by an Australian wing commander. Britain's interest these days seems to be confined to arms sales.
16. ASEAN was founded in 1967 by Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.
17. Those who promote multilateral solutions for East Asia seem unaware of how the Soviet Union used the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe—a child of détente, now known as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—to promote alliance busting in Nato. While conceding nothing in relation to the Warsaw Pact, Moscow gained opportunities to divide and rule in Nato—by playing on tensions between Greece and Turkey, fueling German and Danish nuclear fears, and so on.
18. Japan's most outlying island in the long chain off Okinawa, Yonagunijima, is within sight of Taiwan.
19. “Lee: The Cruel Game,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 June 2000, p. 17.
20. Gray, p. 255.
21. On the Maritime Strategy, see Edward Rhodes, “‘... From the Sea’ and Back Again: Naval

- Power in the Second American Century,” *Naval War College Review*, Spring 1999, esp. n. 9.
22. That underlines the importance to Japan’s maritime interests of the chain of islands that links Japan with the Gulf. Distance is irrelevant: any threat to Diego Garcia, Singapore, or Taiwan represents a mortal threat to Japan.
  23. The Soviet Union acquired its base in Cam Ranh Bay as a reward for backing Vietnam in its 1978 invasion of Cambodia, China’s ally. By gaining access to Cam Ranh, Moscow sought to outflank both China and the United States in the South China Sea. China then attacked Vietnam, to make the point that Vietnam could not rely on the Soviet Union for its strategic security.
  24. Centralist political control—distrust of SSBN commanders at sea—also helped the development of that novel strategic art-form of tying up SSBNs at wharves in the Sea of Okhotsk and near Murmansk. The Politburo feared the *Hunt for Red October* scenario, wherein an SSBN commander sought to defect. Similar centralist fears now hobble China’s drive for “longer legs” in the Spratlys, since it fears that the pilots of its Su-27 Flankers—long-range air-superiority aircraft—might defect to Taiwan.
  25. That is an example of needing to be careful what one wishes for, lest one get it. Would Japan be safer if the great powers abandoned their nuclear arsenals? Given the history of arms control—that bad regimes lie and cheat—could China and Russia be trusted to comply? Without nuclear weapons as a vital adjunct to maritime power, could the United States continue to underwrite Japan’s strategic security?
  26. Japan could not have terminated the original treaty, but the 1960 revision gave both sides the option of terminating it after ten years, on one year’s notice.
  27. During the Cold War, the North Koreans were able to play off the Soviets against China, getting aid from both. Their current economic plight is also, of course, a consequence of disastrous policy mistakes and the callousness of a regime utterly indifferent to the welfare of its population.
  28. A good example of lack of sufficient attention to Japan’s security needs occurred after the unannounced launch of North Korea’s Taepodong-1 missile over the Japanese home islands in August 1998. What was important was not the supposed payload, a satellite, but the improvement in launch capabilities that had been revealed. The United States should have seen the parallel with its own experience with Sputnik in 1957, which showed that all of the United States was vulnerable to Soviet missile attack. Instead, the Clinton administration saw the North Korean missile launch through a nonproliferation lens. Because the United States was unresponsive to Japan’s security needs, Japan decided to acquire its own intelligence satellites.
  29. See Thomas U. Berger, “Alliance Politics and Japan’s Postwar Culture of Antimilitarism,” in *The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Michael J. Green and Patrick M. Cronin (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999), pp. 189–207.
  30. Ironically, at least one knowledgeable Japanese flag officer assessed that the minesweepers were at greater risk than if they had been sent earlier, because they arrived so late that the easy and safer jobs had all been done.
  31. For the Japanese response to the Persian Gulf War, see Peter J. Woolley and Mark S. Woolley, “The *Kata* of Japan’s Naval Forces,” *Naval War College Review*, Spring 1996, pp. 64–7, and Katsutoshi Kawano [Capt., JMSDF], “Japan’s Military Role: Alliance Recommendations for the Twenty-first Century,” *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1998, esp. pp. 15f.
  32. The San Francisco Peace Treaty, which officially ended the Pacific War, recognized Japan’s right to collective self-defense, which the UN Charter also recognizes as a right of all member states. Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1957–60) considered collective self-defense as part of Japan’s natural right to self-defense. However, his younger brother, Eisaku Sato, permitted the unelected Cabinet Legislative Office to proclaim as government policy that although Japan has the right to collective self-defense as a sovereign nation, Article 9 of its constitution forbids the exercise of that right.
  33. Ross, p. 106.